

THE FIGHTER

A Romance With a Strange
Hero of the Battling Breed

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

CHAPTER IV.

The Battle.

(Continued.)

T length, employing a wrestling device, Calne managed to drag the frenzied Fighter backward from behind, and by a sudden wrench to throw him to one side. Still keeping behind Conover, out of reach of the hammer-fists, the slither man succeeded in pinioning Calne's arms by slipping his own hands and wrists between the other's elbows and his body. Trussed up, helpless as he was, Calne writhed and snarled like a leashed bulldog. In another moment he would have wrenched himself free by dint of main force had not Calne's voice at last penetrated the red wrath-mists of his brain.

"Conover!" his friend was shouting, for the tenth time, "if you kill him Miss Shevlin's name will be brought into the affair! Can't you see that?" If

Conover's iron-tenacious muscles relaxed, the organ of Bessie's rage had passed, leaving him spent and apathetic. Calne knew that sanity had returned to the Fighter, and he released his grip on the mighty arms.

"Well!" he observed, facing the dazed, panting man, and setting to rights his own tangled clothing. "You are a nice specimen of humanity to have at large in a civilized country! You might have killed him. You would have killed him, I believe, if I hadn't come when I did. I got to thinking over what you said at the State House and I was afraid something like this would happen. So I came on. Just in time, I think."

Calne, as he spoke, had knelt beside the battered, bleeding thing on the floor. Now he crossed to the washstand and came back with a soaked towel. Tucking as he worked over the unconscious figure, he added:

"You were right to thrash him. He richly deserved it. But why the deuce did you keep on pummeling him while he was down? Does that strike you as sportsmanlike?"

"Sportsmanlike?" panted Conover, his big voice still shaking with ground-swells of the storm that had mastered him. "Sportsmanlike, hey? Dye's spouse I came here for a measly athletic contest, and you beat him like that curly, perfumed whelp. An' I did it."

"You hit him when he was down," answered Calne, crossing again from the washstand to the bed, and shaking water in his face. "And—"

"Of course I hit him when he was down!" snorted Calne. "What d'ye suppose I was to do? He was up on his hands and feet. Go! It makes me sick to hear that old fossil rot about 'not hitting' a man when he's down! What's the matter with you? You gettin' him down if you ain't got to hit him? I didn't come here for a friendly boxin' bout. I came to pay Blacard's off. He was a little bit of a business man when they're a run on a bank that's in trouble. I guess he'll know enough by now to let Dye Shevlin's name alone."

Calne made no answer. He was deftly applying the simple prize-ring expedients for restoring beaten pugilists to their senses. Conover looked down at him in the light of his towel. "I was on the Fighter," he said. "I s'pose in your gold-shirt world folks would say I was all kinds of a cad to keep on pummeling that swab after he'd been knocked out. But them same folks will jump with both feet on a business man when there's a run on a bank that's in trouble. Their saintly women'll take pious joy in chastity to hell some poor girl who's made a fool of herself. But they'd roll up their eyes at the sight of me, Blacard, after he's keeled over. What a blazes is the use of settin' a man down if you ain't got to hit him? It's the A. C. G. business, Wally. Calne, you make me tired!"

His eyes fell on his own torn, bleeding knuckles. He gazed at them in slow surprise; then sauntered over to bathe them in the washbasin. The washstand revealed to him a face pasty white, smeared with coal-dust and smeared and blood and swollen from a blow on the mouth. "I'm an engaged lookin' spectacle, all right," he soliloquized, as he bent to wash. "Lucky I left my suit-case at the hotel this mornin'. I'll need a lot of dressin' up material before I can go to see Dye."

Blacard groaned feebly and moved his head.

"He's coming around," reported Calne. "Now I'm goin' to telephone down for the hotel doctor. While he's on his way here you can think of some story to tell him that will account for Blacard's condition."

"I'll tell him the truth," said Calne, simply. "All except the part about Dye. An' I guess Blacard ain't likely to tell that, either. But what's the use of a doctor? The cur's gettin' his senses back."

"I think you fractured at least one of his ribs when your knuckled him down on a bank that's in trouble," Calne said to him. "Besides, unless his face is to be distorted and hideous for life it must have medical care at once."

Blacard lifted his unrecognizable visage and opened the one eye which was not wholly hidden from view by his swollen flesh.

"I'm a sitting posture and hold a whiskey flask to the torn, discolored lips. Through the hedge of smashed teeth and down the throat of the slithering fighter, Calne's head gulped it down, set motionless for a moment, then groaned again and looked about him.

"Well," groaned Calne, "do you want any more?"

One long second Blacard squinted vacantly at his conqueror. Then, with a shuddering gasp, he turned his head and lay there, quivering and sobbing.

"What a beast you are, Conover!" exclaimed Calne, in revolt.

"That's right," assented Calne, cheerfully. "But I've just broke a worse one. Broke his body, I mean. Not such a bad day's work!"

CHAPTER V.

Caleb Conover Storms a Rampart.

ALEX CONOVER was finishing a solitary breakfast in his room the morning after his return from the Capital. He had eaten heartily, even as he had slept well, and was neither outwardly nor inwardly the worse for his "wakaful day" at State House and engine-throttle. A slightly puffed under lip and a double set of discolored knuckles were his only mementoes of the attack upon Blacard.

In honor of his victory, the Fighter had allowed himself an extra half hour's sleep and a steak for breakfast. It was nine o'clock, so he pushed back his chair from the table and took that had held his morning meal. He lighted a heavy cigar, rose, stretched himself in the lazy luxury of perfect strength, and prepared to go to the day's work.

Conover, in the early years, when he was fighting tooth and nail to lift the moribund C. G. & N. Railroad to a paying basis, had had a room and bath fitted up for his personal use directly to the rear of his private office in the station. Here he had lived, his entire life centering about his toil. Here he still dwelt now that his success was his. The man whose wealth had already passed the million mark and was rocketing toward far higher figures was simpler in his personal tastes and surroundings than was the poorest brakeman on his road. An iron cot bed, a painted pine bureau with fixed mirror, an air-tight stove, a shelf with fourteen books, the dining table and two chairs formed the sum of his living room furniture. One of the station agent's women kept the place in order. The few personal effects he had were received in the private office outside.

One such visitor, Conover had been informed ten minutes earlier, was even now awaiting him there. At least Calne, reading the card, "Mr. John Hawarden, Jr.," judged the caller to have come on a personal matter of some sort rather than on railroad business.

With mild curiosity as to what could have brought the son of Desires's chaplaine to see him, Conover lounged in leisurely fashion to the office.

On his appearance a tall, slender youth rose and greeted him with nervous cordiality.

"Sit down," grunted Conover, accosting under the vigorous grip of the lad's hand. "What can I do for you?"

The caller twisted his neck around with uneasily in its amazing height of collar, fought back a gulp and fell to drawing his tan gloves through his fingers. He noted that the hands were slim, the fingers long and tapering. He also noted that the speaker, despite his almost effeminate delicacy of jaw and steady of eye, the Fighter was, from these signs of the Brotherhood of Strength, amused rather than irritated at the other's nervousness. He felt a little of the desire to set Hawarden at his ease.

"First time you an' me have come together, ain't it?" he asked, less earnestly than he had.

"Yes, sir," answered Hawarden, pleasantly. "I know you by sight—"

and of course by reputation—but it's hardly likely that you can't have heard of my parents' having had the pleasure of meeting you."

"Pleasure, hey?" queried Calne. "That's what they call it. Subject to the fact that you're a fighter, as at not wholly glad memory."

"I'm on a horribly cheeky errand," began the youth, "and to tell you the truth, I'm a little bit of a cad. I speak to you on a rather delicate subject."

"I never saw the 'delicate subject' of the matter," noted the speaker for the briefest instant. But, swallowing hurriedly, he continued his set speech: "I have the honor—the undeserved honor, sir—to ask you to be my wife."

It was out! Hawarden relaxed the knuckle-whitening grip of his fist. His forehead grew moist. He hid his awkwardness of the moment. With open mouth the Fighter sat staring at his guest. At last he found words. "Well, I'll be damned!" he uttered.

"It seems to me," said Hawarden, taking new hold of his sliding courage, "seems to me a more honorable thing to ask your consent—as Miss Shevlin's guardian—before daring to offer myself to her."

"If you had a little more sense you'd be half-witted!"

The boy got to his feet.

"It is your right, I suppose," he answered stately. "But if I let you be an older man than I, and I come to you as an applicant for—"

"You read all that in a book," snorted Calne. "No one's insultin' you and no one's stamin' on your outdirt dignity. You can't wonder I was took aback when you sprung that mine on me. I ain't up to the hilt with the terrible lot of work for the marriage license clerk. An'—why, you're just a kid!" he broke out. "What in blazes are you babblin' about marryin' for?"

"I shall be twenty-two next month," answered the boy, proudly.

"I'm a man, an' entitled to be treated as a man. Not as—"

"Oh, all right! all right!" chuckled Calne. "I was the same way. Used to be."

Can You Beat It?

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By Maurice Ketten

WE CAN'T GIVE
THAT BROKEN
VASE TO
MRS. SMARTRASTUS, PACK THIS
VERY CAREFULLY,
PUT EVERY PIECE IN
AND SEND IT TO
MRS. SMARTMR. JOHN SAYS IT'S
A VASE FOR YOU—
HE SAYS IT MUST
HAVE BEEN BROKEN
IN THE SHIPPINGBROKEN IN THE
SHIPPING!
ASK HIM TO EXPLAIN
HOW EACH BROKEN
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